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Shanesha R. F. Brooks-Tatum

HBCU Library Alliance, sbrooks-tatum@hbculibraries.org

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Southern University and A & M College in Baton Rouge Streamlines Library Service Points

by **Shanesha R. F. Brooks-Tatum** (Project Coordinator/Writer, HBCU Library Alliance) <sbrooks-tatum@hbculibraries.org>

Established in 1881, the **Southern University** and **A & M College** in Baton Rouge, Louisiana became a land grant institution in 1890. Students, faculty, staff, and alumni often refer to the campus simply as “**Southern**.” **Southern’s John B. Cade Library** is named after **John Brother Cade**, a former dean and archivist at **Southern** for 23 years. With approximately 7,500 students, **Southern** boasts an increasingly diverse population.

The Library’s staff was faced with the challenge of streamlining service points as well as renovating the Library when survey data revealed inefficiencies in service. Thus, in 2008 the University implemented the **John B. Cade Library Enhancement Project**, a U.S. Department of Education Title III initiative that funds relevant changes to the Library and updates to the Library’s online presence. Library staff decided not only to prioritize the renovation of physical spaces in the Library, but also to transform the ways that they provide services to library patrons. Student feedback, the innovative ideas of **Emma Bradford Perry**, Dean of Libraries, and the results of **Dawn Kight’s** participation in the **HBCU Librarian Exchange Program** together changed the way that service is delivered at the **John B. Cade Library**.

“A reduction in library positions necessitated a serious look into combining departments and job duties,” **Perry** explained. Therefore, a plan was created to design the “Ask Here” Desk, which blends information and reference services into a single service point. “This way, patrons’ questions are addressed in one location rather than in multiple locations as was the case previously,” added **Kight**, Head of Library Systems and Technology.

The Library renovated its first floor, where the main attraction is the beautifully designed “Ask Here” Desk. This custom-built desk is equipped with specially designed shelf space, storage cabinets, colorful signage, and computers that allow staff to meet information needs of more patrons. Accessible features like multiple height counters allow library staff to service users of various abilities.

In the past, there were separate service desks located throughout the Library’s four floors for reference, periodicals, government documents, and library information. Combining these service points increases convenience and productivity. Library faculty and staff can now concentrate on meaningful projects rather than on staffing four different desks.

Library users pursue the entire research process from beginning to end in one supportive environment with walk-up computer kiosk



*The new Ask Here desk serves as a one-stop information center.
Photo © John B. Cade Library.*

stations, comfortable seating, an updated reading room, a central copy center, and a student center with a coffee shop.

Using social media and new technologies, the library staff also intended to accommodate the unconventional learning styles and technologies of “Generation X” students. “We sought the input of Southern students about what they needed and wanted. We considered different styles of learning as well,” shared **Perry**. The first-floor renovation spaces accommodate diverse learning styles, small group interaction, and individual research consultation.

To begin such a project, library staff took a team approach. “We each bring different values to the project, so involving staff from other library departments including the reference, periodicals, and government documents departments ensured that we would harness everyone’s expertise to maximize this project,” explained **Kight**. As a result, the “Ask Here” Desk has enabled library staff to provide services that are more efficient.

Library staff also ensured that the designer, **Matthew Edmonds of Commercial Design Interiors**, received the support he needed throughout the process of making the Ask Here desk a physical reality. Yet even with excellent, cross-departmental staff support, **Southern University** and **A&M College** faced challenges in implementing the project.

“The natural disasters that Louisiana faced throughout the process posed a considerable challenge to completing the four-year enhancement project, as hurricanes and storms continued to threaten not only the state, but also the Library and the larger campus,” **Perry** remarked. Just recently, in 2008, the Library was damaged by water from Hurricane Gustav. “We are still waiting to renovate those damaged areas with money from **FEMA**,” **Perry** added.

However, with first-floor renovations receiving such an overwhelming response, library staff is dedicated to keeping the momentum going. “90 to 95% of students had positive comments to say about the renovations,” **Perry** shared. The University uses the Library for recruitment and retention events, and many faculty visit the coffee shop and use the lounge and other spaces in the Library. “This provides an additional access point, as well as increased faculty-student interaction. This lets us know that we are on the right track, and we are excited about moving forward,” **Kight** added.

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The Computer Information Kiosks are located in the newly renovated lobby. Photo © John B. Cade Library.